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RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP WASHDC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAGUA 000530

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WHA/CEN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/27/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [NU](#) [PREL](#)
SUBJECT: FOREIGN MINISTER TRIES TO DOWNPLAY ANTI-U.S.
RHETORIC, BUT CONCERNED OVER EFFECTS ON TOURISM

REF: A. MANAGUA 0179
[1](#)B. MANAGUA 0155

Classified By: Ambassador Paul A. Trivelli. Reasons 1.4 (B,D).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Foreign Minister Samuel Santos appears perturbed by threats against U.S. local residents, tourists, and journalists in Nicaragua's San Juan del Sur area. He has requested details of the incidents and will speak with the mayor of the town about the concerns. Santos informed us that the Nicaraguan government (GON) is "unprepared" to participate this year in a national defense workshop offered by the Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies (CHDS). Regarding our protests over President Ortega's derogatory and fallacious remarks against the United States in a recent speech, Santos promised to convey our concerns to Ortega. The Foreign Minister's efforts aside, Ortega appears determined to criticize the United States -- as evidenced by his speech before the police and by the government's communication strategy (septel), which stipulates the use of the media to oppose President Bush, but encourages U.S. investment. End Summary.

GON Back-peddles on CHDS Defense Workshop
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[1](#)2. (C) On February 23, the Charge and PolCouns solicited Foreign Minister Santos' confirmation that his government will participate in a CHDS-sponsored national security workshop, tentatively scheduled for May 16-18. Santos, who had been enthusiastic about the concept when CHDS director Richard Downie met with him and other GON officials the week before, informed us that, after raising the program with the presidency, the decision had been to decline the offer. Attempting to "cushion" the GON's decision, Santos argued that the new government is still being established; many ministers do not even know where they stand and must work until midnight every day to keep afloat. He suggested that perhaps the course would be viable next year, adding that in the meantime, training on disaster preparedness would be welcome. (Comment: During his visit, Downie mentioned the possibility of a follow on course on disaster assistance. Most likely, Ortega and his inner circle viewed the national security workshop as an attempt to influence the policy direction of the administration and turned it off.)

Threats against U.S. Citizens
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[1](#)3. (C) The Foreign Minister was visibly perturbed by

Charge's news of the threats against U.S. local residents, tourists, and journalists in Nicaragua's tourist spot, San Juan del Sur. The Charge explained that the threats started with the detention, trial and sentencing of U.S. citizen Eric Volz for allegedly murdering his Nicaraguan girlfriend. For example, two journalists covering the case and representing newspapers in Texas and California had departed Nicaragua after receiving threats. Another U.S. citizen retiree residing in San Juan del Sur was alarmed after he found his tires punctured. The Charge reiterated our commitment to protect U.S. citizen interests and suggested that this rise in anti-U.S. sentiment could be partly politically driven. He showed the Foreign Minister a copy of a draft warden message warning U.S. citizens to exercise caution, adding that these types of incidents could frighten off U.S. tourists.

¶4. (C) Santos, who reddened and suddenly asked his assistant to turn up the air conditioning in the room, requested details of the incidents and the names of U.S. citizens who have been subject to these threats. He assured us that the police will protect them and offered to speak with the mayor of the town about the problem, but asserted that the Ortega government will not intervene in the Volz case. The Charge reminded Santos that the case and the concerns about the safety of U.S. citizens in the San Juan area have caught the attention of the U.S. Congress and our media. The Foreign Minister's special assistant, Danilo Rosales, and his new Director of the MFA's North America Office, Orlando Gomez noted our concerns.

¶5. (SBU) We next raised an apparent rash of police detentions of U.S. citizens, especially those driving rental cars, and police demands for payment for infractions that are not the responsibility of the renter to pay, e.g. failure to carry a safety triangle. The police threaten to seize the licenses of those refusing to pay on the spot. Santos clarified that the police are authorized to seize a traffic violator's license, but are not allowed to receive payment. Rather, the offender must pay in the appropriate office, and in this type of violation, the rental agencies are responsible. He acknowledged that the police are probably seeking bribes and promised to report the problem to Chief of Police Aminta Granera. The Charge mentioned that we have also raised the issue with the Police Chief.

Anti-U.S. Speech Belies Accord to Deal with Contentious Issues Away from the Public Spotlight
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¶6. (C) The Charge then broached our displeasure and concern over President Ortega's derogatory and fallacious remarks directed against the United States in his February 20 speech before the National Police. He noted that all of Ortega's eleven copious references to the United States were negative and unhelpful, including his remark that even some U.S. presidents are reportedly involved in narcotrafficking, that U.S. society is in decay, and our assistance to Nicaragua is mere crumbs -- while our military is working with its Nicaraguan counterparts to build clinics and schools. The Charge reminded Santos that he had asked us to address contentious issues away from the public spotlight, a concept Ortega has not respected.

¶7. (C) Attempting to downplay Ortega's negative rhetoric, Santos asserted that Ortega was really praising the police for their fine counternarcotics efforts, even with very scarce resources. The Charge replied that attacking the United States is not the way to convince us to provide more support. Santos concurred and promised to convey our concerns to Ortega at the earliest opportunity.

Comment
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¶8. (C) As we reported in Ref A., Santos is a relative light weight, one of the new government's token "friendlier, gentler," public faces, who will attempt to downplay any of

Ortega's egregious antics directed against the United States.

Santos' efforts aside, Ortega appears determined to criticize us, as evidenced by his speech before the police -- a discourse eerily reminiscent of President Chavez' early rhetoric -- and by the government's communication strategy (septel), which stipulates the use of the media to oppose Bush, but encourages U.S. investment.

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